Paris News Letter

By Lewis Galantiere

OUTSIDE, a wind is running over the quay and the lights on the bridges, red and green and yellow, shake at its fury. Below me some one—a pupil of Jean Wiéner, doubtless—is practicing Poulenc's "Mouvement perpétuel" at the piano. And I write of the adventures of Marmouset.

Marmouset lives in a collection of fictional sketches of Paris called "Au Lion Tranquille." He and his copains, his pals, live near the Bastille and, like the heroes of Charles-Louis Philippe, Francis Carco, Aristide Bruant and Jehan Rictus, they live from the earnings of "fallen women." Women! They are children of seventeen and eighteen and go forth nightly to their "biseness" without too much reluctance and who return willingly enough to pass their "thune" (five francs) or "cigue" (twenty francs) to their idle lovers.

The book is the work of a printer named Lucien Nicolas, who has taken the nom de guerre of Marmouset. He retails simply, and much in the manner of the classics of this genre (whom I have named already), the stories of the neighborhood in which he was born and lives. The volume may be read in little more than an hour. To understand it all, however, requires a familiarity with the street slang of the Bastille that I do not possess. I know that "beaux châsses" are "good-looking peepers"; that "doullas" means "lid"; "cliquettes" are ears; "pétzouille" is a "hick." But what is "s'faire morganer dans l' coin"? "Avoir les crocs"? "Casser la croute" is to eat, but what does "pingler" mean? What kind of a drink is "brême"? What does Marmouset mean when he says "tu ne sais pas mieux y tater que mézig" and who will explain Jacquot's intentions when he replies "Viens ici, j'ai à te jucter"? Much of this argot is comprehensible in its context. For one who knows the meaning of "saligaud," "mec," "patelin," "boulot," "nouille," "poire," "combine," all common enough, there is not here a great deal new. This book is unpretentious and undistinguished, even vulgar. But it is entertaining. To learn an expression like "je t'ai à la bonne" is worth an hour's reading.

One American who is certain to appreciate the book is Cuthbert Wright (see his "Bal Musette" in "The Freeman" for November 8). Wright is the only American I met in Paris who made more than a feeble attempt to get acquainted with the city and its citadins. If he had stayed on he might have become the romantic Petronius of Franco-American literature.

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I MET an aged professor of history the other day whose name is universally known. He is of the generation of Lavisse and France, a little chap overripe in years and what is called here "completement gâteux." "Tiens! Tiens!" he coughed at me. "You know what's going on in America. What is this book I heard about recently called 'Civilization in the United States'? Interesting subject, civilization. I teach it. But you have no civilization. Too young. Country too new. Who wrote the book?"

I said what anybody would say about it. I explained that it was written by thirty intellectuals. "Thirty intellectuals!" He laughed until his laugh was strangled in a cough. "There aren't thirty intellectuals in the world. What a funny people you are!" And he went about the room, shaking with laughter, to tell everybody what a funny people we were.

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Recently the Abbé B. sat beside me at luncheon. He is a charming and imposing churchman, an accomplished scholar and a writer of careful, sober French. He aspires to the seat of Monseigneur Duchêne in the Academy and he told me that he had already made the formal calls upon academicians which precede the announcement of candidacy. "Masson," he said (Frédéric Masson is perpetual secretary of the Academy), "Masson is mad as a hornet. He doesn't want me in the Academy. 'Withdraw your candidacy,' he told me, 'and I will see that you receive the 10,000 francs history prize of the Academy next year.' But he can't bribe me. I shall have my seat." It is possible. Neither Porto-Riche nor Abel Hermant is a member, though each has presented himself three times. It is possible that the Abbé B. will succeed where these artists did not.

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A literary lawsuit has caused a stir in the French publishing world. It will be remembered that Mr. Pierre Benoit wrote a novel called "L'Atlantide," whose heroine is named Antinéa. In common with many thousands this book was read by Mr. Jean Grandjean. Mr. Grandjean is a novelist whose writings have been neglected by the great public during the ten years of his literary career. This fact has soured his disposition. It appears, also, that Mr. Grandjean knows Africa very well and lived for months in the Sahara. Remembering the public's neglect of him and the overwhelming success of the African novel of a man who has never been on the back of a camel, Mr. Grandjean determined angrily to show the world that Africa was not a slick drawing in "L'Illustration." He wrote a book which was, to his mind, the supreme revenge of a man who has dined on a handful of old dates. Unfortunately, he too wrote of an Antinéa, giving her name to his book. His publisher, Edition Le Roman Nouveau, enveloped it in a blurb on which appeared most prominently the names of Pierre Benoit and the characters in "L'Atlantide." Mr. Benoit's publisher, Bernard Grasset, calls this fraud and misrepresentation. It is a pretty case—as physicians speak of "a pretty case of typhoid."